

Contextualist and anti-contextualist themes in Wittgenstein

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[Give some intro remarks: going to talk about how Wittgenstein exemplifies a certain strand of thought found in the contemporary contextualist literature (indeed better than does the contemporary contextualist literature), but does not exemplify another; how these two facts are linked; etc.

Apology for broad-strokes character of some of what is to come: trying to bring together a bunch of different strands in my recent work on contextualism.]

§1. Wittgenstein's contextualism

1.1 Philosophy as topic

The thesis of Charles Travis's recent *Thought's Footing* might be put this way: the main concern of Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* is to bring out the pervasive context sensitivity of meaning, and to trace the implications of this fact for understanding language use, thought, logic, rule-following, understanding and related phenomena.

Travis takes it, then, that Wittgenstein's main concern is to defend and trace out the ramifications of a general thesis about the nature of meaning. He is hardly alone in this assumption. And of course, Wittgenstein has a lot to say about meaning, along with thought, logic, rule-following, understanding and the rest. Nonetheless, the assumption seems to me fundamentally misguided. Wittgenstein's primary interest in the *Investigations* is not meaning, thought, or understanding. It is philosophy. Travis, in his own work, aims to offer a fully general conception of meaning, a story about what fixes or constitutes meaning that

has implications for everything people ever say or think. Wittgenstein does not seek such an account. The main lessons he wants to teach us do not concern what people say or think in general, but what philosophers say or think, that is, what we say or think when we do, or try to do, philosophy. It is natural to hear the title of the book as indicating that it contains investigations that have a philosophical character. So construed, it applies equally well to the thousands of books found in the Philosophy catalogs of academic publishers. I suggest it would be productive to hear it rather as we would hear “Political Investigations” used as the title of a work of political science. We should hear it as telling us that the book is an investigation of philosophy—of that distinctive human activity or enterprise. So construed, the title applies to at most a tiny fraction of the items found in Philosophy catalogs.

Is it really true the typical philosophy book or article is not an investigations of philosophy? Surely all professional works of philosophy spend time examining things philosophers say: as mistakes to be criticized, as alternatives to be explored, or as anticipations to be built upon or superseded. But that does not suffice for counting as an investigation of philosophy in the relevant sense. To investigate philosophy in that sense is to investigate it as an activity or enterprise. That entails asking questions like: why do people engage in this activity? What are the aims of the activity? What means are used to achieve those aims, and how do they do so? Such questions will seem worth pursuing only insofar as one thinks that the ends and means of philosophy are not obvious. The great majority of philosophers assume, or at least proceed as if they assume, that these things are obvious. They assume that the general aim of philosophy is understanding; that the question of what particular kind of understanding is sought in a given work is generally satisfactorily answered by the author’s statement of what she intends to show (say, in the abstract or introduction); and that the means by which the understanding is sought are the arguments that constitute the work, which may be good or bad but are almost certain to be of obvious relevance to the work’s stated theses.

Wittgenstein's method, by contrast, is predicated on a denial of these assumptions. He will grant, at least provisionally, that the aim of philosophy is understanding. But the question of what exactly is to be understood, and how philosophical claims or theories contribute to that understanding—these are just the matters he finds obscure and endeavors to illuminate. In taking on this task, Wittgenstein does not abdicate a critical perspective in favor of a purely sociological one. Quite the contrary: his focus makes available a distinctive mode of criticism, in which philosophical pronouncements are criticized not as false per se, but as failing to yield the understanding or insight it was the point of those pronouncements to provide.

Consider Wittgenstein's treatment of the "particular picture of the essence of human language" he finds in the quotation from Augustine that begins the book (1958, §1). In this picture lies the "roots" of a "philosophical concept of meaning", according to which "every word has a meaning," and the meaning "is the object for which the word stands" (§§1-2). How might this "concept" come in for criticism? One approach would be to argue that it is inaccurate—that, for example, it applies to some words but not to all. That might at first seem Wittgenstein's own stance. He suggests that we imagine a primitive language "for which the description given by Augustine is right", and then goes on, he says, to describe just such a language (§2). Augustine, he tells us, is like someone who offers a narrow vision of games, to which we can reply, "You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others" (§3). Perhaps the problem with the "philosophical concept of meaning", then, is just that, while it applies to words like "slab", something different or additional must be said for words like "five" or "of".

But that interpretation is unsatisfactory, as immediately emerges. For Wittgenstein goes on to raise questions about the conception's application to the primitive language of §2 no less than to actual natural languages.

That might seem puzzling. If "the description given by Augustine is right" for the

language of §2, what could be problematic with applying the “picture of the essence of language” given by that description to that language? The answer must lie in the new element introduced in the transition from description to picture, which is to say, in the very fact that the description is taken as giving a picture of the essence of language. Whatever else we one wants to say about the import of talk of essence in this context, its force is at least in part explanatory. A picture of the essence of language would be something that *explains* language. To understand the essence of language would be to understand in virtue of what language is what it is; it would be to understand the source or ground of language’s capacity to do the things it does, to play the roles it plays, in the lives of those who use it. The suggestion in §1 is that we find such an explanation in the thought that words in a language stand for (name, signify, refer to) things. And Wittgenstein’s response is that the thought about signification or reference cannot bear this explanatory burden.

It cannot because our understanding of talk of reference and signification, in relation to given expressions, depends upon our understanding of, and familiarity with, the roles that expression plays in human life. The “*essence* of language”, Wittgenstein tells us in §98, is not supposed to be “something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by rearrangement, but something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we see when we look *into* the thing, and which an analysis brings out.” And the problem is that talk of reference and significance cannot transport us beyond or behind the ordinary phenomena of use to some underlying source or mechanism responsible for them.

Consider these remarks in §10:

Now what do the words of this language *signify*?—What is supposed to shew what they signify, if not the kind of use they have? And we have already described that. . . .

Of course, one can reduce the description of the use of the word “slab” to the

statement that this word signifies this object. This will be done when, for example, it is merely a matter of removing the mistaken idea that the word “slab” refers to the shape of building-stone that we in fact call a “block”—but the kind of ‘*referring*’ this is, that is to say the use of these words for the rest, is already known.

The point here is not that we can’t say that “slab” in the language of §2 refers to slabs. On the contrary, in saying this, we abstract and highlight a real aspect of the use of that expression. It is an aspect about which a person might well be confused. If you think, for example, that when the builder says “slab”, the assistant gets a block, our remark about the reference can set you straight. But by the same token, our understanding of the remark that “slab” refers to slabs rests on our understanding of the linguistic practice in which that word is deployed. If we want to know *what it is* for “slab” to refer to slabs we can do no better than describe that practice: when a builder says “slab” the assistant gets a slab, and so on. We have no independent grasp on, as Wittgenstein puts it, “the kind of ‘*referring*’ this is”. But then it is very hard to see how talk of reference can have the kind of explanatory force that might make it seem apposite to proclaim reference to be the essence of language.

Note that the right conclusion to draw at this point is not that the essence of language is *use*. To say in the context of this investigation that “the meaning is the *use* we make of the word” (§138) is not to offer one’s own “philosophical concept of meaning”. It is not (to seize on one framework familiar in the secondary literature) to advocate replacing the ‘referential semantics’ ostensibly proposed in §1 with an alternative ‘use theory of meaning’. It is rather to disclaim the search for the kind of account—or concept, or picture, or theory, or semantics—the seemed to be in the offing in §1. Use was just what such an account or theory was supposed to explain, and so it cannot be that which does the explaining. The point of identifying meaning with use is to deny that there is a space for a “philosophical concept of meaning”. It is to deny that language has an essence in the relevant sense.

The discussion of the view introduced in §1 is perhaps the most straightforward of Wittgenstein's many engagements with attempts to get at the essence of things, attempts to find "hidden" sources or mechanisms that explain "what lies open to view". Wittgenstein's critiques of these attempts do not typically involve denying the truth of what is said in the course of articulating them. Instead, he tries to show is that what is said cannot take us beyond what lies open to view.

For example, when, while doing philosophy, we say that remembering involves a "mental process", his response is that this is obviously correct: "Why should I deny that there is a mental process? But 'There has just taken in place in me the mental process of remembering...' means nothing more than: 'I have just remembered...'" (§306). The point is that we have no grasp of what talk of mental processes comes to in connection to the phenomenon of remembering except insofar as we see it as a way of encapsulating or restating what we already knew in virtue of being familiar with the phenomenon. For this reason, such talk is incapable of uncovering essence. Seeing the force of this point, and of ways in which it may be generalized, we may be tempted to retreat to a vision of "the yet uncomprehended process in the yet unexplored medium" (§308). It is that inner process, we might say, that constitutes remembering. But in fact all this retreat signals is that we have been unable to achieve the kind of understanding or comprehension the philosopher thought she was seeking. Philosophy, at least in this precinct, has not achieved its aim.

Before moving on, it is worth briefly noting that Wittgenstein's concern with philosophy as a human enterprise or activity is not evidenced solely by his raising and pursuing questions about the aims of philosophical pronouncements and about whether and how those aims are to be achieved. It is manifest as well in his repeated observations about how things strike us, or what we are inclined to say, when we are "doing philosophy" (as at §§11, 131, 194, 261, 274, 295, 303, 348, 520, 592, and 598). And in a different way it is manifest in his conception of his own work as akin to "therapy" (§131) or "treatment" (§255). Wittgenstein believes

the grip of the kind of philosophical project we have been discussing is tenacious. He thinks it is extremely difficult to rid oneself of the sense that meaning, thought, and the rest have essences awaiting discovery. We keep coming back to the thought that there *must* be some story to be found that will take us beyond our “surface” understanding of these phenomena to an appreciation of the source or mechanism that accounts for what is observed at the surfaces. Given the tenacity of the perception of hidden depths, if one is to have any hope of intervening in the conduct of this form of philosophical activity, perhaps even of bringing it to rest, one must pursue a long and relentless course of treatment.

1.2 Contextualism as method

But what does any of this have to do with the question of whether Wittgenstein is a contextualist? What I have been saying does not preclude finding contextualism in the *Investigations*. That Wittgenstein does not hold out hope for a satisfactory “philosophical concept of meaning” does not entail he must reject a contextualist conception of meaning; it depends upon whether that conception of meaning counts as a philosophical concept of meaning in the relevant sense. And that Wittgenstein’s primary concern in the *Investigations* is not to defend a general account of meaning does not entail that he does not in fact offer or at least hint at such an account, perhaps in the course of “treating” some bit of problematic philosophy. It is no implication of the story I have told that Wittgenstein commits himself to an absurd ‘quietism’ according to which he is not allowed to make any positive general claims about the phenomena of human life.

In fact, I do think that we can find contextualism at work in the *Investigations*. But it is expressed less in what Wittgenstein says than in what he does. Its richest and most productive manifestation is not in his pronouncements but in his methodology: specifically, the approach to examining philosophical claims that we have just been discussing.

It is high time I said something about what contextualism is supposed to be. Consider

this passage from Travis:

If the driving idea here were put into a slogan, it might be this: Content is inseparable from point. What is communicated in *our* words lies, inseparably, in what we would expect of them. How our words represent things is a matter of, and not detachable from, their (recognizable) import for our lives. Calling something (such as my car) blue places it (on most uses) within one or another system of categories: blue, and not red, or green; blue, and not turquoise or chartreuse; etc. If I call my car blue, the question arises what the point would be, on that occasion, of so placing it; or, again, what one might reasonably expect the point to be; what ought one to be able to do with the information that the car so classifies. What I in fact said in calling my car blue is not then fixed independent of the answers to such questions. (Travis, 2006, p. 33)

For Travis, what someone says, in calling her car blue is “not fixed independent” of the answers to questions about what “the point would be”, or “what one might reasonably expect the point to be”, in one’s calling the car blue on this or that understanding of the “system of categories” in which her utterance thereby places the object in question. The point of an utterance is (at least) the point it has for the speaker and her audience. And the point an utterance has for given discursive participants will depend upon such things as their aims, interests, focus and expectations. So we might put Travis’s thought this way (with apologies to Frege for the label):

The context principle. What is claimed (represented, stated, asserted, said) in a given utterance depends upon the aims, interests, focus, expectations, etc., of the participants in the discourse.

I take the context principle to capture a core thought of contemporary contextualists. It

is one thing we might mean when we speak of a doctrine of “contextualism” in the philosophy of language. Of course, the context principle as I have formulated it is extremely abstract. This prevents it from having any substantive implications on its own about the contents of any given assertions or kinds of assertion, including, as we will see, claims that we might also think to associate with the label, “contextualism”. But it remains an important insight. Its greatest significance for philosophy, in my view, is methodological.

For suppose we are convinced that context—specifically the interests, focus, expectations, and so on in play in a given discourse or conversation or use of language—play a role in determining the content of some claim. And suppose we wish to understand that claim as well as we can. The obvious prescription is to examine as carefully as possible these features of the context of the claim. If content is shaped by context, then to get a handle on content we should inquire after context. Call this prescription *methodological contextualism*:

Methodological contextualism. To understand the content of a given claim (statement, representation, assertion), endeavor to understand as thoroughly as you can relevant features of the claim’s context.

For example, suppose a philosopher says, “The meaning of the word is the object for which it stands,” or “Remembering is a mental process”. What claims are thereby advanced? We might assume we can just read them off from the words uttered. But if we are methodological contextualists, we will not make this assumption. We will ask after the points of the utterances. We will ask what interests prompt them, at what they are aimed, to what expectations they give rise. Pursuing those questions, we discover, let us say, that they are advanced in the context of attempts to arrive at a distinctive kind of understanding of the phenomena of which they speak, language in the first case, and remembering in the second. The understanding would take us beyond the understanding we have of those phenomena in virtue of our ordinary experiences and competencies, to something that explains

or accounts for the phenomena as they are ordinarily presented to us. For that reason, the understanding the philosophers seeks must be rendered in terms our understanding of which does not itself depend upon our grasp of the ordinary phenomena.

The problem is that no such understanding is available to us of the terms in which our two sample utterances are couched. We are unable to give these terms the special inflection, as it were, that they must have if the uttered sentences are to be vehicles for the expression and reception of the distinctive kind of understanding the philosopher seeks. Thus the conclusion we should draw as methodological contextualists—or, rather, the conclusion Wittgenstein does draw, for it is his line of thought we are tracing—is that the philosopher’s utterances are to be interpreted as aspiring to express claims that they do not in fact, and indeed cannot in fact, express. That is what is wrong with them.

Notice that this conclusion does not entail that we cannot make intelligible claims in uttering “The meaning of the word is the object for which it stands,” or “Remembering is a mental process.” The intelligibility of our remarks will depend upon *their* context, upon our aims, interests, focus and expectations in making them. (Notice, also, that it is no rebuke to Wittgenstein if we find it appropriate to describe at least some of those contexts as the promotion or articulation of a “philosophical” account or theory. We ought to be methodological contextualists no less in our reading of Wittgenstein than of anyone else, and ask what is specifically at stake when he offers his denunciations of “philosophy”.) It does not even entail that we cannot find the philosopher whose remarks we were originally concerned with as advancing intelligible claims with her utterances. For one plausible hypothesis about how the problematic forms of philosophical activity proceed is that the fact that the sentences philosophers use in attempting to articulate “essences” can perfectly well express intelligible claims is crucial to the illusion that we are making progress toward philosophical illumination. We might want to hold, then, that our imagined philosopher both makes an intelligible claim and endeavors to convey a kind of understanding that the intelligible claim does not itself

provide. This possibility reflects what is sometimes called “speech-act pluralism”, the fact that one may say, and do, more than one thing with an utterance.

This point also connects to the difficulty, to which I will shortly return, of leveraging Wittgenstein’s therapeutic remarks into the substantive general doctrines about the truth conditions of our utterances that are the stock and trade of contemporary contextualists. This should not be surprising, given what I have said so far: Wittgenstein’s project is to understand the means and ends of certain forms of philosophical activity, and he would be in the business of systematic assignments of truth conditions only insofar as it bore on that project.

1.3 Methodological contextualism and epistemological contextualism

It will help in seeing what is distinctive and valuable in Wittgenstein’s methodological contextualism to register the extent to which it is absent from contemporary work of a self-identified “contextualist” character. In other work I have argued that contemporary contextualists, while purporting to motivate their doctrines with appeals to what I have called the context principle, do not undertake the kind of serious inquiry into the aims, interests, focuses, and expectations of ordinary speakers and listeners that, I have suggested, the principle requires of us. Their substantive claims about content, I have argued, depend upon superficial and, under scrutiny, implausible assumptions about our everyday aims, interests and focuses. Since Wittgenstein turns his methodological contextualism not upon claims made in everyday life but upon claims made in the course of philosophical activity, I will briefly consider now an example of this failure of contemporary contextualists in the context of their treatment not of ordinary utterances, but of philosophical utterances. Reflection on this manifestation of the failure yields a diagnosis of the dissatisfaction I think many people feel with respect to a certain “contextualist solution” to a certain well-known philosophical problem.

Epistemological contextualism is the view that the truth-conditional content of a knowledge attribution depends upon aspects of the interests and focuses of parties to the attribution. This view might be filled out in various ways. A canonical version goes like this. The truth condition of an assertion of a sentence like “René knows that there is a fire in the study” requires that René meet a certain ‘epistemic standard’ with respect to his belief that there is a fire in the study. That standard varies depending upon which doubts about that belief are salient to parties to the attribution: the more far-reaching the doubts, the more demanding the standard. Now add the assumption that as truth conditions vary, so varies content. [Perhaps register options opened up by denying this assumption.] The upshot is that the content of an assertion of “René knows that there is a fire in the study,” depends in part upon what doubts are salient in the context of that assertion. Such a view has been defended by Travis (1989) and Putnam (2001), as well as by a very large number of philosophers of a more ‘mainstream’ orientation than Travis or latter-day Putnam, most recently and thoroughly in DeRose (2009).

Now, the doubts raised in the context of traditional arguments for the various forms of philosophical skepticism tend to be far-reaching indeed. Such doubts are typically not salient in the contexts of everyday knowledge ascriptions. Thus epistemic contextualism entails that a knowledge ascription expressed by “René knows that there is a fire in the study” in the context of a skeptical argument has a different truth conditional content than an ascription expressed by that sentence in a more ordinary context. This puts us in a position to claim that a skeptic who concludes that no one “knows” anything on, say, the basis of perceptual experience does not thereby refute everyday attributions of perceptual knowledge. Of course, many philosophers have said this about skeptical pronouncements. The distinctive feature of epistemic contextualism is that it allows us to say it while leaving open that the skeptic’s conclusion is perfectly correct and that the skeptic’s argument for that conclusion was perfectly sound. The skeptic fails to impugn our ordinary claims to know not because

the skeptic's reasoning is incorrect in any detail, but because she is talking past us: the relationship she denies people to bear to the world upon which their experiences ostensibly report is not the relationship we claim ourselves to bear when, in ordinary discourse, we say we know on the basis of perception.

One might challenge the truth of epistemological contextualism, or the particular claims drawn about the truth conditions of skeptical versus ordinary denials and ascriptions of knowledge. But even in advance of pursuing such challenges, we can see that there is something missing in any attempt to respond to philosophical skepticism solely on the basis of epistemological contextualism and the associated claims about the truth conditions of different knowledge ascriptions. What is missing is an explanation of *why* far-reaching doubts about perception (or the unobserved, or other minds, etc.) are salient in the philosophical context. No doubt they are salient because they have been raised. But why have they been raised, and once raised, why they are taken seriously by the parties to philosophical discussion? This seems particularly puzzling given the contextualist's observation that such doubts are not raised on ordinary occasions for asking after and justifying claims to know. What moves people in the philosophical context to treat these doubts differently? Is it tied to the distinctive interests and focus on the part of the participants in that activity? Then how are we to understand their interests and focus? These are just the questions methodological contextualism encourages us to pursue. But they are questions the "contextualist solution" to skepticism ignores.

It is not as if skeptics have nothing to say on this score. Descartes and Hume, to take two notable examples, are quite explicit about the aims and focus of the intellectual activity in the course of which they raise skeptical doubts. Consider Descartes. He begins the *Meditations* this way: "Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based upon them" (Descartes, 1996, p. 12). This observation

prompts a distinctive intellectual project: “I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last” (1996, p. 12). To execute this project, Descartes must give up any opinion that he can find “at least some reason to doubt”, and to assess all of his opinions on this score, he must “go straight for the basic principles upon which all of my former beliefs rested” (1996, p. 12). One of those “principles” is trust in what “I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses” (1996, p. 12). The stage is set for the dreaming hypothesis.

What Descartes is after, then, is a certain kind of understanding of, or perspective on, his beliefs. To achieve this understanding, he must first wipe the slate of his beliefs clean, or to use his figure, “demolish everything completely”. Then he must construct a “foundation”, a set of beliefs, presumably general in character, that he can see to be securely justified. He can then recommit to his earlier beliefs to the extent he can find them to be supported by this new foundation. Notoriously, Descartes discovers that once he has demolished everything, with the help of his hyperbolic doubts about perceptual and even *a priori* knowledge, it’s very difficult to find materials for a foundation on which to build anew. Few find Descartes’ eventual solution in the later *Meditations* convincing.

Reflection on this background suggests a range of questions. To what extent does Descartes’ brand of skeptical reasoning depend upon accepting the project of destroying everything and building anew? Is, for example, assumption of this project needed to give the skeptical doubts the force they seem to have in the context of the skeptical reasoning? Is the project possible to execute? Are the skeptical conclusions symptoms of a flaw or self-defeating element in the project’s design? Is the project even intelligible? Is Descartes right that we are beholden, as epistemically responsible agents, to undertake the project once we realize that we were raised to believe a large number of falsehoods? These questions are broadly analogous to those Wittgenstein presses about attempts to get at the “essence”

of linguistic, logical and mental phenomena. No doubt they are very difficult to answer. But my own suspicion is that we will not achieve a satisfactory treatment of philosophical skepticism, an understanding or assessment that ‘gives peace’ (c.f. Wittgenstein, 1958, §133) in this peculiar area of intellectual reflection, until we have answered them.

An epistemological contextualist might object to this last thought, on the ground that the argument based on epistemological contextualism, which I summarized a moment ago, defuses the threat of skepticism, and thus brings philosophy peace. It defuses the threat simply by showing that the skeptical conclusions, even if true, do not undermine ordinary claims to know. But in fact it is highly doubtful that this result, unaccompanied by an inquiry into the features of the philosophical enterprise that give rise to the contextual differences the contextualist notes, would suffice to neutralize the skeptical threat.

Epistemologists take themselves to be addressing fundamental and highly general questions about the relationship between human beings and the world. Answering these questions is supposed to tell us something important about how things are for human beings, and not merely when they’re sitting in epistemology seminars or reading the *Meditations*, but whenever they form a belief about the future, or about other minds, or on the basis of perceptual experience. Skeptics and their philosophical opponents for the most part agree that the skeptics’ answers to these questions are surprising and alarming. These answers may even be so outrageous that they are impossible to believe. But at any rate they are disturbing. Disturbing enough, Hume tells us, to leave one “enviored in the deepest darkness”, beset by “melancholy and delirium” (cite *Treatise*).

Now, part of the reason Hume finds skeptical conclusions disturbing is that he takes them to repudiate ordinary claims to know. What goes for Hume goes for every skeptic. The entire point of Descartes’ endeavor, after all, is to test his previous presumptions about what he knows or is justified in believing. The contextualist interpretation of skeptical denials of knowledge conflicts with the skeptic’s interpretation of her denials. The epistemological

contextualist is thus committed to charging skeptics with misconstruing the contents of their own utterances. Certainly people can sometimes be wrong about the contents of their utterances. But here, that claim amounts to positing a discontinuity between the aim of the skeptic's speech act—namely, to pronounce a verdict on her previous, or on the 'common man's', claims and belief about knowledge—and the actual content of what she claims. This amounts in turn to a distancing of the contextualist's claims about truth conditions from the context principle, from the principle that the content of an assertion is tied to the aims, expectations, and so forth of the discursive participants. Content is claimed to be a function of certain independently specifiable pragmatic mechanisms—e.g., a ratcheting up of epistemic standards in virtue of doubt introduction—and the question of aims and expectations is just set aside. This unmoors the epistemological contextualist's theses about truth conditions from what is supposed to be our primary basis for endorsing any contextualist thesis about truth conditions.

I will not pursue this line of thought any further now. Instead, let's suppose we could somehow convince, say, Hume that the skeptical conclusions about knowledge he defends in his philosophical texts are severed from ordinary claims about knowledge in the way the epistemological contextualist maintains. Would this realization succeed in relieving Hume of the melancholy and delirium occasioned by his skeptical conclusions? Why should it? So far as Hume knows, the conclusions still stand, and they are supported by just the premises, observations and arguments he has used to reach them. Presumably the realization is supposed to show that the skeptical conclusions are not as important or significant as Hume thought them to be, and so that they do not warrant getting upset over, let alone falling into melancholy. But why shouldn't Hume conclude rather that what our ordinary knowledge claims tell us about our relationship to the world is not as important or significant as we thought? Philosophical skeptics, after all, see themselves as critics of ordinary thought and discourse. There seems nothing to prevent a skeptic from accusing ordinary thought and

discourse of failing to so much as have in view the important questions about how our beliefs relate to the world they concern.

The point is that Descartes and Hume see the arguments they pursue in their philosophical texts as ways of arriving at important general truths about the human condition. If there is to be any hope of convincing Descartes or Hume that the conclusions they reach do not have the significance they take them to possess, we must attempt to understand what sort of truths they are after, and why they take their modes of argument to be apt for revealing such truths. And of course it is not really Descartes or Hume that we want to convince. It is ourselves, who are no less prone to be impressed by skeptical arguments and then to quail at their seemingly incredible conclusions. A truly satisfactory course of therapy would need to meaningfully engage with the aims and expectations we have when we embark on, or get caught up in, skeptical reasoning. It will not be enough to propose analyses of the alleged impact on truth conditions of various of the discursive symptoms of these aims and expectations.

§2. Wittgenstein's anti-contextualism

2.1 The context principle and the contextualist's principle

Consider the view defended by Richard (2004). Richard imagines two acquaintances of a certain Mary, Naomi and Didi, who have each just learned that Mary has won a million U.S. dollars in the lottery. Didi is impressed by Mary's windfall, and says to her friend, "Mary is rich." Whereas Naomi, who moves in more rarified circles, says to her friend, "Mary is not rich at all." According to Richard, both Naomi and Didi have probably spoken the truth: "it is very plausible that the truth of their claims about wealth turns on whatever standards prevail within their conversations" (Richard, 2004, p. 218).

Call this view *economic contextualism*:

Economic contextualism. The truth conditions of an assertion of a sentence of the form “S is rich” align with the prevailing conversational standards for the application of “rich”.

Talk of alignment should be interpreted thusly: according to economic contextualism, a given assertion of “Mary is rich” is true iff Mary satisfies the prevailing conversational standards for application of “rich”.

But what is the force of Richard’s talk of prevailing conversational standards? He presumably at least means to say that Didi and her audience on the one hand, and Naomi and her audience on the other, are disposed to make and assess claims couched in terms of “rich” in ways that map onto different standards for counting as rich. Talk of the standards prevailing within a given conversation may perhaps suggest as well that having one’s utterances, and reactions to utterances, accord with the respective standards is a social norm for the participants to the respective conversations, such that utterances that reflect competing standards would meet with disapproval. Finally, such talk may also be meant to suggest that the parties to the two conversations *rely* on the respective conversationally-prevailing standards in forming the judgments they then express with utterances containing the term “rich”. This last thought would need to be treated carefully: in particular, we would need to avoid the naïve assumption that people always form such judgments on the basis of general and independently specifiable criteria for being rich.

If we generalize Richard’s thought, we get the following:

The contextualist’s principle. The truth-conditional content of an assertion aligns with the prevailing conversational standards for the application of the terms used.

(Typically, contextualists focus on simple categorical assertions—assertions of sentences of the form “a F’s”—and on predicative terms like “rich” or “knows that . . .”. But there is no reason why the basic thought shouldn’t generalize, although matters would get complicated.

I won't pursue these issues.)

Nearly every notable claim made under the banner of “contextualism” in the contemporary discussion is an application of the contextualist's principle. Such is true of epistemological contextualism: whether the truth conditions of a knowledge attribution require that the subject be in a position to rule out a given doubt on independent grounds depends upon whether participants to the conversation in fact treat that doubt as relevant to the attribution. And application of the principle is manifest throughout Travis's discussion of his motley of thought experiments: again and again, Travis's basis for a claim about the “systems of categories” in which a given utterance “places” the item under discussion is an observation about the standards the conversational participants themselves conform to in making and assessing these utterances.

What is the motivation for assigning truth-conditional contents in accord with the contextualist's principle? The motivation, I take it, is the context principle. From the premise that the content of an assertion depends upon the aims, interests and focus of the parties to that assertion, the conclusion is drawn that the content aligns with the prevailing conversational standards for the application of the relevant terms. That move is explicit in Richard. He starts with the claim: “It is, I think, beyond serious dispute that the truth conditions of ‘Mary is rich’ vary across contexts, as vary the interest, focus, and so on of participants in a conversation” (Richard, 2004, p. 219). And from there he moves immediately to economic contextualism, to the claim that the truth conditions align with prevailing conversational standards for application of “rich”. This inference can seem inevitable. Once we have accepted that truth-conditional content is beholden to the interests and focus of the conversational participants, what alternative do we have but to suppose that the truth conditions are a function of the standards the participants deploy, or manifest conformity to, in making and assessing the relevant sort of claim?

That there are alternatives, that an alternative should be taken in the specific case of

discourse about wealth as well as in many other cases discussed by contextualists, and that an inability to see this is a symptom of the failure of contemporary contextualists to be serious methodological contextualists, are all claims I defend in other work. Sometimes, indeed often, serious consideration of aims and interests warrants, in light of the context principle, that we interpret assertive content as floating free of locally prevailing conversational standards, and cast it instead as beholden to standards embedded in a much larger discourse, or perhaps even to ‘standards’ that prevail in no discourse at all. The argument for this claim raises many complex issues, and I cannot broach them today.

A different question is whether Wittgenstein advocates that the interpretation of assertive content be controlled by the contextualist’s principle. I do not deny that there are places in which it looks like he might. But there are many fewer such places than contextualist interpreters of Wittgenstein believe. I have time to discuss only one putative such place today: Wittgenstein’s treatment of family-resemblance concepts.

2.2 The contextualist’s principle and family resemblances

Travis writes:

Suppose I say (on an occasion, of course), ‘Something satisfies the concept chair iff it is a chair.’ I purport to state some condition for something’s being a chair. What condition? That depends on how ‘chair’ is to be understood on the use I made of it in stating that condition: on what would count as a chair where being one is understood as it would be on that use. The idea of family resemblance (on the present reading) is that different things would so count on different occasions for the counting—on different *admissible* understandings of being what ‘chair’ speaks of, namely, a chair, so on different uses of ‘chair’. (Travis, 2006, p. 59)

According to Travis, when I use the clause, “it is a chair” to state a condition on objects, what condition I state will vary from occasion to occasion depending upon what counts as satisfying the common noun “chair” as I use it on these occasions. So a given object might meet the condition I thereby state on one occasion while failing to meet the condition I thereby state on another occasion—not because the object changes, but because the condition I state does. I am not interested in evaluating the merits of this view in itself, but rather its identification by Travis as “the idea of family resemblance”. Similar interpretations are defended in Bezuidenhout (2002); Recanati (2005).

The term “family resemblance” is introduced in §67. In §66, Wittgenstein asks us to look for features common to all the activities we call “games” and distinguishing them as such. He suggests that any feature we come up with—amusingness, competitiveness, having winners and losers, etc.—will turn out to fit only some of those activities. The “result of this examination” is that we see not universally shared features, but rather “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (§66). And he says, “I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’” (§67). The phrase “family resemblance”, then, is used to formulate the following observation: if we try to find features in common to all the items we group under a general term like “game”, we will find instead family resemblances.

For Travis, the “idea of family resemblance” is the thesis that what we state to be so of an object, in calling it a “game” (or some other general term), will vary from occasion to occasion. The question is why this thesis should be thought to be the message of Wittgenstein’s observation. I take it the train of thought ascribed to Wittgenstein is this. Suppose on some occasion you classify an activity that is amusing but lacks winning and losing as a “game”. (Wittgenstein gives an example of such an activity: “ring-a-roses”.) Suppose on another occasion you classify an activity that has winning and losing but is not amusing as a “game”. That these activities have such different features suggests that you are operating

on these two occasions with, as Travis would put it, different understandings of being what “game” speaks of. Accordingly, what you state to be so of the first activity, in calling it a “game”, differs from what you state to be so of the second activity in calling it a “game”. The allegiance to the contextualist’s principle is evident: because on these different occasions you are relying on different criteria for applying “game”, we should take what you express with that term to vary accordingly.

But I think this interpretation of the message of Wittgenstein’s family-resemblance observation gets his intent almost exactly backwards. To begin with, we should note that Wittgenstein takes his observation to hold equally well if we substitute talk of the “the concept of game” for talk of “the term ‘game’” (§71, 75). It would beg the question against the contextualist interpretation to assume that Wittgenstein understands concepts as items at the level of content (à la much of the contemporary literature), so that sameness of concept would guarantee sameness of content. But however we construe Wittgenstein’s talk of concepts—and what we ought to do, here as elsewhere, is to construe his words as untechnically as possible, as giving us no more or less than those words do in ordinary discourse—his point, self-evidently, is that it is the same concept that is correctly applied from case to case even as different family resemblances come into play. And that is enough to ensure that there is a striking failure of fit between the text and Travis’s designs upon it. For Travis, differences in which family resemblances are salient on occasions for applying a given term entail, or at least make likely, differences in the content one would express in applying that term. But Wittgenstein’s explicit point is that differences in which family resemblances are present do not entail a difference in the concept one applies. Again, the problem is not that it is impossible to understand the notion of a concept in such a way as to render these claims consistent. The problem is the great oddity of taking Wittgenstein, in making the latter claim, to be thereby arguing for the former.

A proponent of Travis's interpretation might object that Wittgenstein does not merely make his observation about family resemblances and then set it aside: the observation is rather a springboard to larger and deeper philosophical points. And that is certainly true. But reflection on these larger points just reinforces that the contextualist interpretation is misjudged.

One of the central strands of the reflections prompted by §66 and §67 concerns the question of how concepts and meanings are to be explained. Suppose we are asked to explain a given concept. How are we to do so? One implication of the family resemblance observation is that for at least a large range of the concepts associated with ordinary general terms, there will be no common feature F such that we can explain the concept by saying, "An object falls under the concept iff it is F ". We will be unable to delineate such a feature even if we help ourselves to talk of logical sums or other such apparatus (§§67, 68). In such cases, we can do no better than give some examples and point out some of the family resemblances they exemplify: "How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: 'This *and similar things* are called "games"'" (§69).

Notice that appreciating this point about explanation does not require denying that there is something in common to all the things we call "games". What all the activities we call "games" have in common, setting aside errors in our application of the term, is that they are *games*. We need that piece of sanity if we are to say, as Wittgenstein does in the sentence just quoted, that we can explain to someone what we call "games" by describing, precisely, games. But this fact about the things we call "games"—namely, that they are games—is not a fact we can have in view in advance of our possession of the concept of a game. It is thus not a feature to which we can appeal in explaining that concept, or similarly, the meaning or application of that term. (It is just because noting that games are games goes no distance toward elucidating the concept of a game that we do not think to mention it

when asked, as in §66, to list features common to games.)

Now, what can seem troubling about the kind of explanation Wittgenstein envisions, in which, we describe some games and say, “Games are things like this,” is its vulnerability to misunderstanding. We might wonder: how can we ensure that the recipient of the explanation takes the examples in the right way—that she picks up on the right similarities, that she brings to bear what’s she’s learned from these examples to new cases in ways of which we would approve? And the answer, of course, is that we cannot ensure this. But that is not a distinctive failing of this kind of explanation: “giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining—in default of a better. For any general definition can be misunderstood too” (§71). Concepts like that of a game, whose ‘family resemblance’ character is so obvious, are useful for Wittgenstein in that they provide a particularly vivid illustration of a moral that holds more generally. The moral might be put this way: if explanation of our words and concepts is to be possible, the target of the explanation must have, or acquire, something that cannot itself be imparted by an explanation. She must have, as we might put it, the right sensibility. She must react to and employ and build upon our explanations in ways that place her within the circle of competent users of our words and concepts.

This thought, which from one perspective is near platitudinous, nonetheless has crucially important ramifications for Wittgenstein. It is a member of a small family of interrelated themes and points of emphasis that inform the whole of the *Investigations*. They are continually deployed in Wittgenstein’s various attempts to loosen the grip of what he regards as confused and damaging philosophical conceptions and pictures.

Tracing this deployment would require another talk or two. But enough has been said, I think, to make clear how ill suited is the contextualist’s interpretation of the “idea of family resemblance” for making sense of the line of thought just briefly traced. The examination of “game”, a term whose applications so strikingly exhibit a family-resemblance character, cannot do its work if we react to the examination with the thought, “Well, if the features

of the activities we pick up on in calling things ‘games’ vary so greatly from case to case, then there is surely *some* level at which our understanding, our concept, of what counts as a ‘game’ varies from case to case.” This thought is essential for motivating the contextualist’s interpretation. But what is needed to grasp the point of Wittgenstein’s appeal to family-resemblance terms is to appreciate precisely that sameness of concept *needn’t* correspond to sameness of features in the examples we cite to explain the concept. That is what is supposed to impress upon us the dependence of successful explanation, of achieving understanding, upon sensibility—upon the recipient’s taking up and making use of the explanation in ways that will bring her in line with us but which the explanation itself cannot guarantee.

Again, I don’t wish to deny that talk of “concepts” and “understanding” is malleable enough that we could find a way to interpret Wittgenstein’s remarks so as to render them consistent with the contextualist view that Travis associates with “the idea of family resemblance”. But the fact that a text can be interpreted in such a way that it is not logically inconsistent with a given view is, needless to say, a thin basis upon which to justify attribution of that view to it. The point is that Travis’s (and Bezuidenhout’s and Recanati’s) interpretation of the family resemblance discussion miss entirely what Wittgenstein is there laboring to get across.

2.3 The contextualist’s principle and reductionism

There are other passages in Wittgenstein that might seem to indicate an allegiance to the contextualist’s principle. I can’t discuss them today. Instead, I’ll close with a general, if admittedly circumstantial, reason for doubting this attribution. At bottom, the contextualist’s principle, and the various specific contextualist doctrines that follow its template, seem to me to be newfangled attempts to scratch an old philosophical itch: namely, the hankering for reductive accounts of the content-involving (and so rationality-involving) phenomena of human life. The passage from Travis that I quoted in introducing the context principle

declares content to be inseparable from point. But nothing in that passage precludes an interpretation according to which point and content are coeval, such that neither can be understood except in connection to the other. The contextualist's principle, by contrast, opens the door to something more: to the prospect that we can see content as determined by independently specifiable dispositions, patterns of attention, and perhaps norms, discernible in the behavior of conversational participants. The thought would be that the contextualist's principle is true because facts about content at some level consists in the dispositional (or social-normative) facts in virtue of which given standards can be said to prevail in given conversations. At least one contextualist, DeRose (2005, 2009) has defended this view explicitly. I suspect it exerts an attraction, however subliminally, in many other quarters. But insofar as the real appeal of the contextualist's principle lies in its apparent reductionist promise, it can have no real appeal for Wittgenstein.

[Summarize preceding: the contextualism we should find in Wittgenstein, and the contextualism we should not.]

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